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Under the Chestnut Tree:

Dialectic between Plato and Orwell et. al.

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Throughout the ages civilized people dreamed of a perfect society without poverty, crime, or inequality. The Bible (NAB, 1971, P. 2) told of the first paradise; “Then the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and he placed there the man whom he had formed.” The myth of paradise on Earth existed continuously since. The ancient Greeks also believed in the notion of a perfect society. In *The Republic* (p. 1) ‘Plato sought a cure for the ills of society not in politics but in philosophy, and arrived at his fundamental and lasting conviction that those ills would never cease until philosophers became rulers or rulers became philosophers.’ Plato’s work was an in depth dissertation regarding justice and the perfect society. Thomas Moore wrote the next significant work regarding the desire for paradise in *Utopia* (Orwell, 1986, p. 257). Moore’s work not only set the model for this genre of novels but also provided the referential name, utopia. The emergence of the ‘negative utopia’ did not occur until the twentieth century. The trilogy of twentieth century negative utopian novels [Zamyatin’s *We*, Huxley’s *Brave New World*, and Orwell’s *1984*] (Orwell, 1986, p. 259) ‘expressed the mood of the present and a warning for the future.’ All three novels presented similar types of futuristic societies. A great deal of literature focused on utopian writings for their criticism. This paper attempted a slightly different style of criticism.

Plato and George Orwell both wrote about utopias with similar subject matter, although, with dissimilar styles. The style found in *The Republic* employed a dialect conversation. Orwell, on the other hand, wrote in the narrative. A brief biography and plot summary for both of the aforementioned authors will be provided. The major portion of the paper shall be in the form of a dialectic between Plato, George Orwell, and guests. The two main characters will discuss and argue the negative utopia theme.

Orwell's thesis remains that The Republic is impossible and can only lead to the conditions found in Oceania. Plato, conversely, argues that his treatise is valid and The Republic could exist outside of theory.

Plato was born in 427 BC in Athens, Greece and was the student of Socrates (Plato, 1987, p. 1). His family heritage was one of prominence and wealth in Athenian society (p. 1). One of Plato's most noteworthy accomplishments remained the foundation of the Academy in the fourth century BC (p. 1). This was 'the first permanent institution devoted to philosophical research and teaching, and the prototype of all western universities' (p. 1). The Republic could be considered Plato's greatest written legacy to the philosophical and academic world.

The Republic is Plato's answer to his disgust with Athenian politics and society (p. 1). In this work Plato speaks in the dialectic to persuade the members of the conversation about the true meaning of justice, the just man, and describe his utopian society. He takes the reader on a logical journey through argument after argument to gain assent with the theories he is forwarding. The other characters in the work are helpless against the onslaught of reasoning. The society Plato creates is obviously not the only type of theoretical civilization available for examination.

George Orwell was born in Bengal, India in 1903. He adopted the pen name of Eric Blair (Orwell, 1986, p. 1). Blair was 'educated at Eton, and after service with the Indian Imperial Police in Burma, returned to Europe to earn his living writing novels and essays' (p. 1). He mustered with the Loyalist forces during the Spanish Civil War and held a fierce hatred for totalitarianism (p. 1). Considering himself a socialist (p. 1) Blair was extremely critical of the communists. He wrote his criticism into 1984.

The critical novel 1984 centers around life in Oceania and the experiences of Winston Smith. Surviving in Oceania is a day to day struggle to comply with the draconian regulations of the government known as INGSOC [English Socialism] which was ruled by Big Brother and the Party. The reader is lead through the insaneness of life and the eventual downfall of Smith.

Dialectic follows:

Characters:

George Orwell, Plato, The Bartender, Plotinus, Surprise guest

Scene:

The Chestnut Tree [a small cafe in Oceania]. There is a small murmur of noise from the telescreen in the background. The cafe is empty except for the bartender and George Orwell who is sitting at a small table near the back of the cafe reading a news sheet.

O. I can't believe the amount of lies in these news sheets. The condition of the world is deplorable. Total control has been initiated and there does not seem to be any relief in sight. The proles have certainly become useless, not like the loyalists in the Spanish Civil war.

B. Did you say something comrade?

O. No, just thinking out loud about this filthy world.

B. That's a dangerous habit. You should watch what you say. Can I get you some victory gin?

O. What, that vile liquid. No thank you. And don't worry about my safety. If anyone is safe here it is me. By the way, if you see a strangely dressed chap send him back. I've been waiting for him.

Enter Plato

Ahh, Plato, so good of you to come. How was your trip? Pleasant, I hope. Sit, sit.

P. No actually, it was not pleasant. You know, I was stopped three times on the way here by young fellows dressed in black demanding to see my papers. Papers, indeed!

Why, do they not know who I am? A man of my stature and reputation should be free to roam the world at my leisure. My theories and actions were the beginnings of philosophy and knowledge.

O. It is precisely about beginnings that I wish to discuss with you.

P. Well then, pray you continue.

O. You see, I created this world as a warning to future generations about the dangers of excessive power. When one group seeks power for power's sake then the result is what you see around here. Humanity is reduced to forced ignorance and degradation. The amount of alienation is staggering. What I claim is that your Republic would become my Oceania.

P. Surely you are not serious and are only trying to provoke me.

O. Oh, but I am serious and would never attempt to raise your ire for the mere pleasure of it. There are remarkable similarities between your world and mine.

P. I must say I look around me and see no evidence that what you claim has any merit. My Republic is free from strife and chaos. The citizens are happy doing their assigned tasks to the best of their abilities. True happiness. Unlike this dreadful society. However, since I value discussion will you grant me the right to defend my work against your charge?

O. Of course.

P. Splendid. Since you mentioned beginnings, let us begin just there. You draw these supposed similarities between our two creations and allow me the opportunity to convince you otherwise. Agreed?

O. Agreed. Let us begin. When you discussed your Republic you began with how a state comes into formation, correct?

P. Yes.

O. People come together and form a state with the notion that there is safety in numbers. They form laws and each citizen has a purpose. Am I right or have I missed the point?

P. No, I'd say you have it.

O. O.K. Every man has a specific job that he must attend to in order that each person does not have to do everything for himself. We could call this specialization of labor where each person performs a specific task for the good of the community so that someone else does not have to do that job. Would you agree?

P. You are correct.

O. Well, this is exactly what occurs in Oceania. The Inner Party or Gold Class rule, the Outer Party members or Guardians perform defense, security, and administrative work, and the proles or workers do the menial labor, each with a specific task. Additionally, each person will perform the task that they are best suited for and chosen for. Remember, that this is all done for the good of the state.

P. I must concede that in this area our states are similar.

O. Next, you discussed the education and training of the Guardians or in Oceania the Outer Party. One of the fundamental tenets is the censorship and control of what the

Guardians were allowed to learn. In other words the education of children falls totally to the discretion of the state. Do agree with this?

P. The basic principles of education in the republic is to train those who showed natural aptitude in the correct forms of poetry and philosophy. The ideal ruler is also a philosopher.

O. The correct forms of poetry are those that would mold the children's minds towards a certain type of thought process?

P. Yes. The poetry of Homer told of the gods committing murder and other atrocities. The Guardians should not be exposed to literature that was false or would pollute their minds with unnatural ideas. Music and the fine arts are allowed but you have to keep in mind the dangers of the imitators. The painter only paints an imitation of what the subject actually is. Some types of music can also have negative influences on children and must be regulated for content.

O. Don't you think that this same practice is present in Oceania today?

P. I am not familiar enough with your society to comment. Perhaps you could explain the system further in order that I might be more apt to discuss it.

O. The children are indoctrinated with the ideology of INGSOC as soon as they are old enough to comprehend. They are taught a process called doublethink. Doublethink is fervent belief in what one knows to be a lie. In addition, children are only allowed to learn a set number of words with the intent that control of vocabulary leads to control of thought which leads to control of person. Children are encouraged to report their parents to the thoughtpolice.

P. Wait a moment if you will. Define thoughtpolice.

O. Thoughtpolice were the fellows in black who stopped you for your papers. You see, in Oceania, thought is a crime. Not only can you not say anything unorthodox you can't think anything unorthodox.

P. My dear fellow, the Republic is not anything like this.

O. Just a moment, I'm not through yet. Once children reach a certain age they join the Spies which is a youth group dedicated to teaching them how to recognize thoughtcrime and they are rewarded for turning people in. So you see they are indoctrinated from a very early age, they are only allowed to learn certain things, and those that excel are sometimes brought into the Inner Party; just like the Republic.

P. I hardly see how this rigorous control of thought is similar to the type of necessary control that we exact in order to facilitate the proper education of our future rulers.

O. Wait, it gets worse! In your republic, the process of procreation is also restrictive is it not?

P. Well, yes as a matter of fact...

O. And, don't the philosopher-rulers decide which people are allowed to marry and after the couple bears a child, you whisk it away to a state run nursery? The same type of enforcement occurs in Oceania. People must apply to marry and if the party feels the joining is not correct, they veto the application. Certainly, you see the similarities! They are right before your eyes. Or are you too proud to recognize that which is before you?

P. Sir, remember to whom you speak! I have been called the father of philosophy and do not need to be lectured by the likes of you.

O. My apologies, sir.

P. Very well. Now, I must admit that there are similarities between our systems thus far but that does not mean that one society would digress into the other.

O. Perhaps we could continue the discussion before drawing conclusions.

P. Certainly, let's proceed.

O. Now, just so I am clear, would you explain the nature of justice?

P. This is certainly not an easy task. Our discussion in Athens began with just this question. first, let us stick with the state and the rulers of the state. A just ruler, rules not for honor or wealth but for the benefit of the subjects. Just as a doctor heals for the benefit of the patient, not himself.

O. So a ruler is just if he has the benefit of the people in mind with respect to their welfare and happiness?

P. Precisely.

O. Would a person who truly loves his state and its ruler be said to be happy and have good welfare? Certainly, if someone willingly lived their lives for the good of the state and was satisfied with the ruler, then it follows that this person would be happy and content.

P. Yes.

O. Well, the citizens of Oceania love Big Brother, are happy, dedicated in their work, and live to serve the state. Furthermore, O'Brien guides people toward this love of country. So, the people love Big Brother, Oceania, and O'Brien is a just ruler because he has the good of the state in mind.

P. I think your argument is flawed here. These people live in terror and fear. Their lives are reduced to rubble as if in a quarry. They have no humanity left. Look at

Winston and Julia. They hate the system, loathe Big Brother, and want nothing more than to cripple and destroy Oceania. The proles are poverty stricken and ignorant.

O'Brien is definitely not a just ruler. Remember, I said that it is unjust to harm another.

O. Didn't you also say that a crime should be punished?

P. Yes.

O. And that punishment does not harm because it makes a man better?

P. Again, yes.

O. And wasn't Parsons happy organizing festival events, and Syme happy rewriting the eleventh edition of the Newspeak dictionary?

P. Well, yes, I suppose they were.

O. And wasn't O'Brien in his mind punishing Winston and Julia when he tortured them for crimes to make them better people?

P. From his point of view, yes.

O. O.K. So after their punishment, Winston and Julia were freer. They loved Big Brother, loved Oceania, and did not live in terror or fear. They were happy and content. You said yourself a ruler was a just ruler if the subjects loved him. Furthermore, the proles may live in poverty but they are not necessarily unhappy. They are ignorant. They don't know things could be different. The government planned it this way on purpose. They live, they breed, they die. They're happy. Ignorance is bliss. Now that the children of the Party members are being totally controlled, just like in the Republic, there will soon be no more Winstons and Julias. The state is free of strife. Remember saying that was the goal; to have a society free of strife?

P. What you have said is quite troubling.

O. Oceania and the Republic are one in the same.

P. Not yet. There is a large and crucial difference. The rulers are philosophers. The rulers of the Republic rule for the sake of the people, and inspire creativity. O'Brien even tells us that he rules for the sake of power.

O. Wait a second! You censor creativity. And O'Brien is quite the philosopher. Recall his diatribe to Winston in the Ministry of Love. That, my friend were the words of a philosopher. And whether you want to admit it or not, the rulers of the Republic have immense power and you would never be able to lessen that power once established without violent revolution which becomes impossible with the control of information.

P. I am not defeated yet. Are you ready? The difference is in intent. In Oceania the intent is power. In the Republic the intent is justice and peaceful coexistence within the society.

O. You are splitting hairs because the outcome is the same. If you are not yet convinced of the validity of my thesis then you tell me how they are dissimilar.

P. Although you have proven many similarities on a micro-level, the larger picture eludes you. The citizens of the Republic are not controlled to the extent they are here in Oceania. They have individual freedoms and desires. They have a certain freedom of choice. They conform because it is for their own good and the ultimate good of the state.

O. Do they? Are you certain? You can't control human ambition for power. Eventually the rulers would succumb to the incitement of power. Recall Lord Acton stating that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Anyhow, we have already addressed these aspects and I refuse to be redundant. Once Again, tell me of a specific dissimilarity!

Silence

Very well, since I have not yet convinced you, and you can't think of any dissimilarities, let's take it from another angle. Is the Republic a desirous way to live?

P. It is.

O. And would a society be willing to adopt your principles?

P. They would.

O. Good, I want you to meet someone.

Bartender, ask the man sitting at the counter to come back here.

B. Very well, comrade.

Enter Plotinus

Plot. Mr. Orwell, thank you for inviting me. I've waited a long time for this opportunity.

O. Do you know Plato? Plato, this is Plotinus, an admirer of yours.

P. No, I have not had the pleasure.

Plot. Master, this is truly a great honor. I am a student of your work and a great admirer. I've waited hundreds of years to meet you.

P. You are too kind.

O. Plotinus, were you able to hear our conversation?

Plot. I caught most of it and I must say I am most distressed. Your arguments are extremely convincing.

O. Since Plato is not aware of your situation and what happened in your time, why don't you tell us.

P. Yes, by all means tell us your story.

Plot. I am an Egyptian who lived in the third century AD. I started a school in Rome in 244. At the school I spoke about Platonic philosophy, and aesthetics from a Christian point of view. I was so taken with your republic that I attempted to actually create your commonwealth society according to your laws. The Roman emperor Gallienus approved of the idea and gave me permission to go ahead with the plan. The city was to be called Platonopolis in the district of Campania. It almost came to fruition but then I was ordered to halt the scheme. Apparently, Gallienus' counselors rejected the idea and the program was finished.

P. Did they tell you why they did not want to go ahead with the design?

Plot. Well, no, actually they did not.

O. Its clear why they didn't want to go through with the plan. They knew then as I know now what the Republic would have become.

P. Oceania.

O. That's right.

P. I am still not totally convinced.

O. There is one more guest that you should meet. Joseph, would you join us please.

Enter Joseph Stalin

S. Comrades, so good of you to invite me to your little party. What an interesting conversation you have been having. Bartender! Bring me a glass of that glorious victory gin, I prefer vodka mind you but on this occasion I'll make an exception. Leave the bottle.

B. Gladly comrade. At least someone appreciates the gifts of our Ministry of Plenty.

S. My compliments Comrade Orwell, you have created the perfect society.

P. You mean to suggest that you like it here.

S. Like it. I love it. Everything seems to be in order.

Plot. What exactly do you love about it?

S. It is as I have said, everything is in order. You know I am little jealous of the technology. If I would have had the technology, I would have made this society. I would have ruled the world. I certainly tried. But you can't blame me for being born when I was. I most admire the creations of doublethink, newspeak, the telescreen, and the thoughtpolice. By the way, notice how handsome Big Brother is... but I digress. We began much like Oceania with a glorious revolution. Lenin was in charge back then and he had a vision similar to yours Comrade Plato.

O. Are you getting all of this?

P. I am afraid that I am.

S. Don't interrupt! Where was I? Oh yes, Lenin. Anyhow comrades, Lenin's vision was almost the same as the Republic. You see, the German, Marx, had the vision of a classless society. Lenin was smarter than that. He knew that someone had to make decisions. A country of workers was doomed to failure or conquest whichever would come first. That is the only difference Comrade Plato, the classes. Lenin invented the party as a means of administering policy, that's all. I, however, had more vision. That fool Trotsky attempted to take over when Lenin died. I dealt with him straight off. With me surrounded by my loyalists and any competition for power eliminated, who could stop me. My purges were legendary. Although those here in Oceania are not bad either. Every now and then you must clean house as it were.

Plot. But you killed your friends.

S. Friends! What do you know about friends? Why, my friends tried to stop me. My friends thought that I was mad. Little did they know that I was the only one with true vision. My friends only got in the way of progress. Genius has no friends.

O. Mr. Secretary, perhaps you could be a little more specific about how our worlds are similar.

S. Gladly, comrade. Our three worlds are like triplets. All three basically the same but each with its own personality. We all have three classes, call them what you will, they are the same: the ruling class, the administrative and security class, and the workers. We all tightly control the amount of information each class receives. It is good to keep the masses ignorant. Control of information is everything. We also control the food. Hungry people do not care about politics, they care about eating. Power. We protect our power by eliminating those who dissent against us.

P. There is nothing in my Republic that calls for what you are talking about.

S. So you mean to say that if a member of your Republic did something against the wishes of the ruling class that they would not be punished?

P. There is a difference between committing a crime against the welfare and well being of the state and thinking incorrectly.

S. Only in interpretation, Comrade Plato. Please, allow me to finish my analysis. As I was saying before about information. Control of information goes beyond mere data. Comrade Plato, control of the arts was nothing short of spectacular in your Republic. We three only allowed approved literature, music, theater, and the other creative arts. Our goal is to change the way people think. Without bragging, we even claimed that our way of thinking could be passed on genetically. But our greatest ally is

fear. Oceania has the Ministry of Love, I had the Gulags. The Republic did not mention such a place but it would have to have had one. People will not give up their individuality easily. It must be taken from them, purged if you will. My purges were my greatest accomplishments.

P. Where is your conscience? Are you saying, sir, that you are proud of the death of millions of people? You are not a just ruler! You are nothing more than a disturbed animal!

S. What! How dare you judge me! This is your vision! You created this, Comrade! Comrade, surely you are not so naive to think that you could stop me in your Republic. I am O'Brien. I am Big Brother. I am eternal. Whenever fools like you dream of utopia, I will be there to control the population for you. I will maintain order for you. I will administer justice for you. You need me. Comrade Plato, do not look so sad, who knows, if it was not for you I might never have existed.

P. May the gods forgive me.

Plot. If your society was so perfect, why did it fall?

S. As I said before we lacked the technology. Technology grew faster than they knew how to control it. They could have won though. When the time was approaching that the wall was about to fall, they had two choices. They could have tightened control or loosened it. They choose the latter. The Chinese, however, choose to tighten control and it worked. Remember Tiannemen Square? Control of the population is crucial. You control them through fear and lack of information. It is all very simple. Control of information is everything. Well, comrades, it is time for me to take my leave of you. Good day.

Exit Stalin

Plot. I am too stunned for words. I have a lot to think about. Mr. Orwell. Master Plato.

Exit Plotinus

O. What do you think now?

P. I think. I think we have been in the presence of pure evil. This is not what I intended. I was trying to cure the ills of society not create a diseased planet of oppression.

O. Really? Are you sure you weren't trying to preserve your own power? You come from a wealthy and influential family. You tasted power. You lived in a corrupt democracy. Isn't this what you wanted? Power?

P. They would have deserved this.

O. Who would have deserved what?

P. The Athenians! The Athenians would have deserved a world like this, a life like this, like here in Oceania for what they did to him... They murdered him!

O. Socrates?

P. Yes! Yes. The brightest light of our time. You should have heard him. The wisdom poured forth like a spring. No education, no training, just unbridled, raw intelligence forcing open your mind with words. And they killed him out of their own ignorance. I was powerless to stop them. It was then that I realized that only those like us with vision and clarity of thought should hold power. Hold it away selfishly. Only with power, power that I did not possess, could I have saved him. You are right, this is

my world. Stalin is right, I am a fool. No one should suffer this because of another man's revenge. My own callousness and pride brought me here.

O. You are free of the burden now. Come, let's go home. Its been a long day.

Exit Plato and Orwell

The bartender turns up the telescreen to announce that the Ministry of Plenty has exceeded the anticipated boot production by ten thousand pairs. A cacophonous attention signal is followed by the proclamation that everyone should prepare for the two minutes hate.

Fade to a room deep underground in the Ministry of Truth where O'Brien sits watching Plato and Orwell exit the Chestnut Tree Cafe. With a slight smirk he says to no one in particular; 'Another time. Another place. I am eternal'.

THE END

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